

Evolution in Europe: Under Pressure, L

Lithuanians See Profit From Soviet Pressure

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VILNIUS, Lithuania, April 28 — By squeezing Lithuania's economic life-line, President Mikhail S. Gorbachev may have brought his conflict with the errant republic closer to compromise, but many Lithuanians say his embargo has had another, unintended effect: the quick maturing of an independent Lithuania.

From factory managers to taxi drivers, from the grocery stores to the President's office, Lithuanians say Mr. Gorbachev has unwittingly forced them to think more seriously about how they will live outside the paternalistic Soviet system.

In the short run, although the selective economic blockade now in its second week has not yet caused serious hardship here, it has concentrated the politicians' attention on the quest for a compromise.

Lithuanian political leaders realize that it is only a matter of weeks before their citizens begin to suffer. Mr. Gorbachev no doubt recognizes that Lithuania in misery would distract attention from his meeting next month in Washington with President Bush.

Way to Save Face

The appeal by France and Germany on Thursday for the republic to temporarily suspend enforcement of its March 11 independence declaration seems to have given both sides a face-saving way at the bargaining table. The Lithuanians can portray any concessions as a gesture to the European leaders rather than capitulation to the Kremlin's economic pressure.

But the deeper effect of the sanctions, Lithuanians interviewed here say, appears to be quite the opposite

from what Moscow intended. The blockade of fuel, industrial materials and other goods has unified Lithuanians more than ever in their feeling of alienation from Moscow and hardened their resolve to be free.

The layoffs and black market gasoline prices, Lithuanians say, have introduced the market economics faster than the republic's leaders might have dared on their own. The workers raised with the security of the Soviet safety net are now getting a small lesson in unemployment and inflation and seeing that it is unpleasant but bearable.

An estimated 10,000 workers have been sent home from factories idled by the fuel embargo, and officials predict the number will triple in a week. But it will be several weeks before they exhaust unemployment benefits and begin to feel the pinch.

Encouraging Independence

The embargo has also spurred the independence Government on a search for direct economic ties with the West and with insurgent city councils and factories inside the Soviet Union.

Nothing much has come of it yet. A few factories have reportedly managed small freelance deals with neighboring Soviet republics, bartering bricks for a truckload of fuel oil or meat for machinery.

Nonetheless, Prime Minister Kazimieras Prunskiene said, people are beginning to calculate the real value of what they produce.

"Up to now our entire economic structure, everything we buy and everything we sell was based on Moscow," she said today. "Now those connections are being demolished, not by

us but by Moscow, and we are trying to manage on our own."

Officials say the embargo has forced industrial managers to begin contemplating conservation, which never mattered when oil and everything else came from Moscow according to a plan.

Most striking, the showdown with Moscow has introduced a sobering note of pragmatism into the sometimes ro-

mantic politics of independence.

Kicking the Giant's Shins

From a distance, the Government of Lithuania sometimes resembles a comic opera, in which the amateur leaders of a pipsqueak republic kicks the shins of the lethal giant next door.

In fact, judging from talks here with dozens of Lithuanians, their political leaders are playing out deep national feelings of pride and suspicions of the Soviet Union — feelings that are almost always locked behind a stoic Northern demeanor. But then there are such moments as the one when a woman suddenly bursts into tears in a crowded grocery store recalling her childhood in a Stalinist camp for Lithuanian deportees.

"Moscow does not understand why France is afraid of them, Germany is afraid of them, and little Lithuania is not afraid," said Virgilius Cepaitis, a member of Parliament and a fervent nationalist. Mr. Gorbachev, he adds, "seems to forget that from 1944 to 1953 we fought against the Soviets. Longer than Vietnam."

The Lithuanians' intense national pride and deep mistrust of the Soviet Union are embodied in the republic's president, Vytautas Landsbergis, a musicologist whose public pronouncements sometimes seemed to flow from a kind of mystic nationalism.

A Visceral Distaste

Mr. Cepaitis, who works closely with the Lithuanian President and shares his visceral distaste for the notion of placating Moscow, talks of the conflict with Mr. Gorbachev as a climactic battle, one which will speed the demise of a doomed Soviet system.

"Moscow only understands one language, the language of strength," Mr. Cepaitis said.

"We understand that this is a big inconvenience for the whole world," said Mr. Cepaitis, wearily acknowledging the Western views that Mr. Gorbachev's stability outweighs Lithuania's liberty, but suggesting that the collapse of the Soviet Union would be a blessing.



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Moscow's blockade brings a dose of pragmatism to Vilnius.

"It is our duty to the world to destroy this empire."

In the new world of Lithuanian politics, this strain of messianic nationalism struggles with a more conventional political pragmatism.

While few deny that Mr. Landsbergis represents the aspirations of many Lithuanians, many questioned his political tactics, his seemingly boundless moral stubbornness that could not be more remote from the cut-a-deal politics of Mr. Gorbachev.

By most estimates about one-third of the Lithuanian Parliament shares Mr. Landsbergis's reluctance to compromise. Another third is loyal to Mr. Landsbergis, but ambivalent about his tactics. The remaining third, while no less committed to independence, supports the idea of dealing more flexibly with Mr. Gorbachev.

Gain for Compromise

Arvydas Juozaitis, a young politician who dropped out of the leadership of the Lithuanian independence movement because "I personally don't trust feelings in politics," said this week that he believed the conflict with Moscow may embolden the pro-compromise faction.

"The absolute majority of Lithuanians are not satisfied with the Landsbergis position, but at the same time the absolute majority does not see how to overcome what they have already done," said Mr. Juozaitis, who caused a stir last month with an article calling the election of Mr. Landsbergis "a historic mistake."

"The support for Landsbergis is still strong because there is no clear alternative program," he said.

Eduardas Vilkas, one of the most influential members of the group favoring compromise, said he senses that Mr. Landsbergis is moving slowly toward a more conciliatory stand.

Mr. Vilkas favors a six-month moratorium on the independence declaration, accompanied by a guarantee from Mr. Gorbachev to honor Lithuania's sovereignty afterward.

"Inflexibility is also a kind of strategy, but I do not think it is the right one," he said. "We can hold out against economic sanctions for quite a long time. A lot of people are prepared to ride it out to the end. But there is no purely economic solution to the blockade, unless we learn to live without oil."

Caring About Neighbors

Mr. Vilkas said Lithuania will never be safely free until people in the Soviet Union themselves have absorbed enough democracy to care about their neighbors.

"I used to think the democratization of Russia would take three to five years, but it is happening much more quickly," propelled by the example of Eastern Europe.

"It is dangerous to live with angry neighbors," said Mr. Vilkas, explaining why Lithuania has an interest in Mr. Gorbachev's fate.

"The position of the West is understandable, because the risk to the world is great," he said. "If there is serious instability in the U.S.S.R., this will not be simply the civil war of 1917. Now it is a question of nuclear weapons, atomic power stations, chemical factories. All of this represents a global danger."